Nudity: Has American Media Changed Its Country’s Mindset?

By Selina Kiss

Central Michigan University

ABSTRACT: American Media provides the public with a distorted view of the human body due to the excessive use of pornographic references. This view is extremely different than the view of both past cultures and other cultures existing in the world today. Some sources believe this distorted view began from when Protestantism was brought about by the church, others believe it is due to the influence of the media. The American media explosion could be what changed the corrupt minds of its country’s people.

*Key Words: nudity, media, culture*

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August 29, 2015. The day I moved into my dorm to begin my sophomore year in college. My other two roommates were already moved in so they helped me set up my bed and unpack my insane amount of unnecessary shoes, clothes and other random objects. As we were finishing I decided I would warn my roommates ahead of time that I rarely wear clothes, “So, I figured I should tell you guys that I’m naked a lot. Actually, I’m naked all the time.” I said nonchalantly, not thinking it was that big of a deal. One of my roommates shrugged it off and continued to help me unpack, but the other looked a little concerned.

“You mean like … in your bra and underwear, right?” She asked quietly?

*Shit*, I thought to myself. *I didn’t think it would be that serious*.

“No. I mean completely naked.” I responded proudly. Not caring about how she felt.

It’s incredible to me the amount of judgement Americans have towards others when it comes to nudity. Obviously in areas other than my dorm room I am fully clothed, but I rarely will wear a bra despite how loose or tight the clothing may be. The absence of this one piece of clothing alone causes a large amount of stares, dirty looks and confused faces to be directed towards me. When I would ask an adult or older individual about why this may be, they said they understand the view of the public; clothes should be worn more often than they currently are. Americans have a different view on nudity then other and past cultures have had. Today, there is an increasing amount of attention drawn to celebrities in the media who wear little to no clothing and our grandparents see this as horrendous do to their upbringing where everyone was covered from head to toe- leaving their children ignorant to the ways of other cultures. Has American media caused its country to have an immature mindset?

Beginning when humans first evolved up until the last few hundred year’s humans wore clothes sparingly: during times of celebration or in accordance to certain rituals. Aileen Goodson explained the ways nudity has been viewed throughout multiple cultures and varying time periods in her article *Nudity in Ancient to Modern Cultures*. Goodson (n.d.) stated "When a Greek wished to dance or work, he simply slipped out of his clothing and proceeded. It was the natural thing to do, and no one was dismayed by...seeing a nude person dancing or working,” (prg.1). Today, a person taking place in such activities would be seen as incredibly obscene and most likely would be on the news or at least trending in multiple sources of social media. However, the Greeks felt it was both natural and healthy. Goodson explained that the Greeks would train in a place known as a gymnasium, Goodson (n.d.) then explained “The very word *gymnasium* is based on the root word *gymnos* (meaning "naked"), the gymnasium being defined, thereby, as a place where one stripped naked to exercise” (prg.1). With this being said, by literal definition it is not obscene to exercise in the nude. Moreover, Americans see what is happening in front of them and are judgmental based on their lack of factual information which is influenced by what the media is portraying rather than the literal act.

Exercising naked isn’t a problem in countries such as the Netherlands. Goodson (n.d.) found that a gym in the Netherlands is now offering one day of the week for the opportunity to work out nude (prg. 3). In the United States something of this nature wouldn’t be intriguing; however, it’s allowed to be naked in public in other places such as the Netherlands, various sources feel this is because countries such as there have a higher level mindset. In the Netherlands “Nudity is definitely not shocking or even arousing” (Goodson n.d.). This mindset is due to their understanding of how the human body is normal and not regarded as sexual.

Americans feel countries allowing nudity are inappropriate, but according to multiple sources it is not the other countries that are inappropriate: it’s the American mindset. According to *The Perils of Public Nudity: European Edition* “Getting naked, in public … is considered “no big deal” here and nakedness does not automatically equate sex like it does in 99.44% of the US,” (2012). Both natives and tourists in Europe will go to the saunas and spas with varying attitudes. As a native, it is completely normal to see a room full of naked people going about their business but to a tourist unaware of the situation it may come as a shock. This article explained the shock a friend of theirs had when first going to the European spa. Within fifteen minutes the woman he was with insisted on leaving because she was convinced the other people in the spa were staring at her breasts (prg.2). For some it may take time, but understanding the ways of other cultures helps to expand one’s mind on their own views. It is not as Americans would think; the body is seen as natural and beautiful in Europe rather than the erotic and sexual view it has in the Americas.

Similarly in ancient Greece during the Olympic Games competitors competed against each other in the nude. Goodson (n.d.) stated “No one thought it wrong that young Spartan girls should go naked in public dances and processions. The young men who gathered to look upon the events displayed no lust or wantonness.” (prg. 1). The mindset of the Spartans indicated they were a mature group of individuals who understood the natural form of the human body. Not only did the ancient Greeks have this mind set, but first religious readers understood The Bible agreed “… there is no sin in nudity itself; but if a person uses the nudity for lustful or immoral purposes he has misused it, and this constitutes a sin” (Goodson n.d.). This view did not change until Protestantism came into play. The brought about different views of the bible that were looked upon in a different way than before, illustrating sexual pleasures were that of sin and came from the devil (prg.1). Protestants changed the attitude in which American’s had toward nudity for many years to come, leaving room for many more religions to follow in the Protestant footsteps. Moreover, Colwell (2007) explained how the Puritan’s were so afraid to be naked that they wouldn’t even bathe themselves (prg. 3).

If the Protestant religion wouldn’t have altered the view of nudity, clothing wouldn’t be as big of a necessity as it is today. Not too long ago, after World War I during the women's suffragette movement the role of women changed drastically. After taking on multiple jobs to cover for their husband’s women were changing the way they dressed. “By the 1920s women had emancipated themselves from restricting dresses and were showing off their bodies in abbreviated blouses and short skirts” (Goodson n.d.). This one change alone caused men to crash their cars while driving down the road due to the removal of a few inches of women’s clothing. Multiple sources show that, for many cultures, clothing is now seen as the new “natural”.

In mass media many different items are advertised such as that in television commercials. Each company has their own target audience based on the product the company is selling. This target audience will cause the advertising techniques to differ; however, many target their audience based on looks and sexual appeal. For example, Victoria’s secret models gliding their slender, bronze bodies down the runway wearing nothing but as minimal clothes as possible catch the attention of their lustful customers. However, more recently “The Federal Communications Commission, which regulates America's broadcast media, banned a series of prime-time ads depicting six middle-aged women posing nude for Dove Proage products, claiming it was inappropriate, though the ads ran successfully in Europe and Canada.”(Colwell 2007). This statement alone separates the mindset of the American people with that of other countries due to our lack of maturity as a viewer. The target of Dove was not to show off the bodies of multiple older women, but rather to show the effectiveness of their product and how beautiful women are in varying shapes, sizes and ages. The outcome was obvious, Colwell explained that Americans were unable to view a woman’s body without alluding to sex. This conclusion was due to the disgust associated with the view of a nude, middle-aged woman. In addition, the public was intrigued by the barely clothed younger models gliding their way across the television screen because those were the women they would like to see in bed, which was why they were outraged by the appearance of nude, older women.

Sources indicated Mass Media was the reason Americans see the body as they do today. According to the article *Warnings for Parents* published by Forever Families, one study determined that throughout one year, approximately 10,000 to 15,000 children will hear and/or see some type of sexual encounter (prg. 8). This contributes to the reason men see women in a sexual manner causing their bodies to be both laughed at and joked upon. Furthermore, pornography is being shown and put on nearly every social media feed available. Another study found young adults often accidentally view pornography online due to incorrect web addresses (prg. 8). Although these cites may be ignorant to their indirect audience, the distribution of this type of material causes younger viewers to be pressured to do similar acts. “Social networking sites such as MySpace encourage youth to "describe themselves" on the Internet, and some girls utilize the opportunity to pose in provocative clothing and post notices of their "sexual availability,"(prg.8). The pressure to look “good” by wearing little to no clothing and the want to evoke a sexual desire is not only present in the media in which young adults are viewing but also in the toys made for children. There are multiple toys targeting a young audience such as Bratz Dolls and Barbies that wear minimal clothing such as short skirts and fish nets which are advertised as getting attention from the opposite sex (prg.8). This leads to a statement made by the Huffington post explaining how parents told their kids that their partner should care about what is on the inside and should not permit them to wear revealing clothing because it attracts the wrong type of attention (prg.6). If parents told statements such as that to their children, how are children supposed to understand that what their favorite toy is wearing is wrong despite that it is presented everywhere in the media?

Displaying too much skin may be frowned upon in the media, but there are still millions of artworks worldwide displaying the human figure in the nude. Dreher (2012) described how hard it can be to take a child through a museum due to the nude sculptures and paintings displayed throughout the gallery and still be able to explain to them the importance of modesty (prg. 4). Dreher (2012) then illustrated the importance of explaining to them the beauty of the form of the body when displayed in an artist setting (prg. 4). Art displays qualities from as far back as Paleolithic time periods when it was socially accepted to be in the nude. It is important that younger children are pushed to understand this concept and learn from past cultures. Sometimes there is debate to how much the human body should be exposed. According to Goodson (n.d.), when Life Magazine wanted to take its first photos of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel, the church agreed under the condition that all pictures had to absent of nudity (prg.1). Depending on the time period one views this statement from, this may or may not have been necessary despite the artist’s intent to portray form rather than pornographic images.

Islamic clothing serves a variety of religious functions. The Qur'an stresses modesty for both men and women, and Muslims generally regard the covering of the body as a way to conform to this teaching. Traditionally, the degree of covering increases if an individual is in public or with members of the opposite sex. Specific areas of the body are regarded as sexual in nature, and as such, must be hidden. Men cover their bodies from their waists to their knees, cover their heads, and don outerwear in public. Women traditionally conceal their hair and neck and cover themselves from the neck to ankles. Arm coverings extend to the wrists. Muslims believe that a woman demonstrates virtue by wearing such dress. In some parts of the Muslim world, women also wear an outer layer that covers the face or a burqa (face mask).

During the Victorian ages, the showing of skin was seen to be extremely erotic, causing all sin to be covered except that of a woman’s face and sometimes hands. Today the Islamic culture stresses that of modesty so “Specific areas of the body are regarded as sexual in nature, and as such, must be hidden … “women traditionally conceal their hair and neck and cover themselves from the neck to ankles. Arm coverings extend to the wrists,” (7). However, there are also many other practical and climate issues regarding the dress they are required to wear as this was not the case during the Victorian ages. A women during these times was not supposed to feel the desire for sexual pleasure and were to be aside from this type of subject. It was to the point that any type of word relating to the human body or ones sexuality were taking out of the language and substituted with other words to prevent the act of lust. For example, when eating chicken at the table they would not use the word “leg” for a particular piece of meat, but rather another word to distract from that of the human form (prg. 1).

Some sources believe a male should feel some type of sexual desire towards women. Esther Hartstein (2002) stated “Nudity subordinates the male mind to its baser instincts, and creates an atmosphere of lechery where there would otherwise be serious civil interaction, stunting functional society” (prg. 5). She then adds that nudity has two different types of people: people who think that women do not need to be clothed and see themselves as whores, and people who do not feel a sexual desire towards women and is a waste of a man. These are pretty much the opposite extremes of the spectrum put into two different categories. These categories would not have been created if it were not for the erotic sexual appeal of the media. Hartstein now believes that nudity corrupts the public do to its negative effects on men and women (prg. 5). This is true to the understanding that Americans have immature minds that push toward sexual interaction any second it can.

Today, the American mindset is focused on the idea of sex which is portrayed throughout the media which differs from the views of other cultures and time periods. Although it may be important in the American culture to wear clothes, should it be necessary? Although there are many answers, not everybody has the same view nor does everybody come from the same background. Next time I decide to walk around naked I should consider the views of the people around me.

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